

February 7, 2023

SB 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs To Provide Free School Meals to All Students

Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, and members of the Committee on Children,

My name is Ashley Alexander and I am a volunteer for the organization Nourish My Soul, a nonprofit that advocates for food justice in Connecticut. I am also a mother to two elementary aged children, as well as a volunteer at a local soup kitchen, Pauline's Stock Pot Kitchen and Pantry. Today, I am asking for your support for SB 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students.

Every individual is deserving of food, regardless of their social or economic status. As a volunteer at a local soup kitchen, I have first hand knowledge of the dramatic increase of people in need of assistance and the amount of people who are food insecure. I am also a very active member in our school community, and serve as the PTO president in a town where there is no school lunch program. During the pandemic, when there was a federal mandate for free lunches, East Granby did not have a food service program to utilize and therefore was unable to offer free lunches to students. It wasn't until much later into the mandate, when they partnered with the neighboring town, Granby, who was only able to supply our town with cold, premade food, as we had no kitchen or food service employees to serve kids a hot meal, despite the federal mandate. During this time, I partnered with the school social worker to provide her with food to deliver to families in our town who did not have access to food. As the pandemic went on, the number of families who needed assistance continued to rise. We live in a small, rural town that does not even have a grocery store. And although there appears to be a lot of wealth in town, there are also a lot of families that would qualify for free or reduced lunch. In fact, the number of students in East Granby that qualified for free milk (which is the only nutrition service our schools provide) jumped from 12% to 21%. Unfortunately, that means at least 21% of our students in town may be struggling with food insecurity, and may not have access to nutritious, or enough food at home. Passing this bill would insure that not only would children have access to food, but would give children a better chance to do well in school, as hunger has been shown to severely and negatively impact a child's performance in school, not to mention the stress and long term effects not having access to food could have on a child's health and body.

Approving this bill alone though is not enough. Not only do children deserve access to food, but they should be given the opportunity to learn how to grow and prepare nutritious, whole food. Nourish My Soul works to empower children and end food insecurity by allowing anyone in the community access to the food we grow, and also allow for children to take part in the entire process of growing and preparing food. In order to continue education that gives children knowledge and access to the land and nutritious food, added funding for Farm to School education in SB 929 is greatly encouraged.

Thank you for your consideration,

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